

# The Biography of Borderlands: Old Oswestry Hillfort and Modern Heritage Debates

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*Responding to the recently published edited collection exploring the hillfort and landscape context of Old Oswestry (Shropshire, England) by heritage professionals connected to the Hands off Old Oswestry Hillfort heritage protection campaign (Malim and Nash 2020)<sup>1</sup>, this chapter reviews and reflects on the significance of the overall 'life-history' or 'biography' of Old Oswestry hillfort and its immediate environs to the present-day emotive and mnemonic significance of the monument. It argues that this biographical dimension fosters the hillfort as a locus of borderland identity, which explains the affinities of local inhabitants to Old Oswestry and frames the ongoing debates and conflicts regarding its significance and setting. Giving greater attention to researching and communicating this biography promises to inform and foster future public engagement and community action.*

## Introduction

The market town of Oswestry, north-west Shropshire, houses a community that has inherited a distinctive borderland identity and heritage. First, and with sensitivity for the numerous social and political criticisms of geographical pre-determinism by many academics, including Baud and van Schendel (1997: 211–212) and Bassin (1992: 3), it can be said that Oswestry's borderland identity originates from the inherent quality of its position and its environs in relation to the historic Anglo-Welsh political border, fixed since the early 16th century as a part of the English county of Shropshire but with deep socio-economic and cultural connections with Wales and home to Welsh-speaking communities and households (Lloyd Jones and Gale 2020: 8). Second, it can also be seen that Oswestry's borderland identity has been continuously reiterated through Old Oswestry hillfort's proximity and enduring monumental presence at a key junction between west-east and north-south routes (T. Malim 2020a). In this regard, Old Oswestry hillfort must be conceptualised less as a category of later prehistoric site and more as a 'timemark' in the landscape (Figures 1 and 2). Despite discontinuous use and long abandonment, it has acquired a place in mythological time, conflating past and present (cf. Gosden and Lock 1998). As such, the monument and its environs have accrued stories and significance over the *longue durée* for those inhabiting and traversing the landscape (Ingold 1993).

While the recent book *Old Oswestry Hillfort and its Landscape* (Malim and Nash 2020) compiles the evidence for key stages in the hillfort's life-history, the significance of the monument's biography as a mechanism for public engagement is left under-explored. This chapter, therefore, builds on this valuable recent scholarship but argues that the prominent prehistoric hillfort adjacent to the historic and contemporary town, Old Oswestry hillfort, operates today as a site of memory – a *lieux de mémoire* – for the town and its immediate environs which in turn explains the hillfort's significance for local people.

Not only does Old Oswestry hillfort represent one of a dense band of hillforts in eastern Wales, which Varley (1948: 42) refers to as a 'hillfort province' (Lloyd Jones and Gale 2020; Matthews 2020a); but it also memorialises and embodies the local ethos over several periods of Anglo-Welsh history. The affinity of local people to the hillfort has recently become manifest in the campaign to protect the scheduled ancient monument (first designated in 1934) from developer group Galliers Homes and Shropshire Council themselves (T. Malim 2020a; Malim and Nash 2020; Nash and Malim 2020; Trigg 2020a). In recent years, the hillfort has become a contested place through a heated and long-lasting battle between locals,

<sup>1</sup> <http://oldoswestryhillfort.co.uk/>



Figure 1: Looking south over the uppermost ramparts of Old Oswestry hillfort from the western entrance and towards the medieval and modern market town of Oswestry focused on St Oswald's church, traditionally perceived as the site where King Oswald of Northumbria was slain and his body displayed by the pagan King Penda of Mercia (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2015)



Figure 2: Old Oswestry hillfort ramparts (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2020)

archaeological professionals and heritage organisations campaigning against plans to extend Oswestry in the direction of the hillfort through the construction of residential housing to the hillfort's south-east. The campaign is titled Hands Off Old Oswestry Hillfort (HOOOH) has received sustained local and national press attention and they remain active and supported nationally and internationally (Johnston 2019; Nash and Malim 2020). This group of local advocates have mobilised an anti-development campaign over the last decade, most recently against a planning application to build 91 houses in the hillfort's hinterland (Shropshire Council 2019; Trigg 2020b) (Figure 3). Of particular note is how their initiatives have not simply articulated the contemporary value of the hillfort as well-preserved prehistoric earthworks, but by successfully deploying the life-history of the monument. We argue this has been a strength of that campaign: deftly coalescing the hillfort with Oswestry's long-term borderland situation and mentality (Johnston 2019; Robertson 2019). Furthermore, the recent surge of publications centred on Oswestry and its hillfort reveals the contribution of professional archaeologists to the local cause (Malim and Nash 2020). We argue that HOOOH have exploited and enhanced the residuum of Oswestry's borderland identity which is deeply reinforced by the inseparable heritage and memory which emanate from the life-history of Old Oswestry hillfort. In this capacity, the hillfort constitutes less a 'Stonehenge of the North', for while the HOOOH campaign has used this to assert a 'national' status to the monument and mobilise wider support against development, and instead it operates more as a *lieux de mémoire* for constituting a distinctive Anglo-Welsh borderland identity for Oswestry and its surroundings. This insight has implications for future public engagement at, and related to, this ancient monument, namely that while a 'national' discourse needs consideration, it is in the strength of local feelings and senses of connection that campaigns will succeed or fail (see also Ray this volume).

To comprehend the cultural significance of Old Oswestry hillfort and, by extension, the navigation of its biography by heritage and local interest groups, we cannot consider it a prehistoric monument in chronological and spatial isolation. Equally, it is not simply typical of one prehistoric monument category: it is not comparable to other hillforts in the vicinity in terms of scale, form or inherited associations. The hillfort has instead inherited a distinctive persona that simultaneously manifests and informs a robust communal consciousness garnered from the long history of habitation and presence adjacent to the town, and perhaps also from experiential impact of the monument looming over the northern approaches to the town and as a dramatic perambulated set of fortifications. Those who live or have lived in Oswestry and its environs have inherited the emotional and mnemonic residue left by the topographical, cultural and ethno-linguistic borderland which is seemingly manifest in the monument (Anzaldúa 2014: 3). Thus, the following chapter will chart this biography and situate the monument in relation to its borderland context within the heritage of Oswestry to gain an aspect of the present developer battle that is informed by its *genius loci*.

### A biography for Old Oswestry hillfort

Old Oswestry hillfort (NGR SJ 296 310) is situated on a fluvioglacial mound to the north of Oswestry town, dominating the landscape to its east and west. Since 1934, the hillfort is a scheduled ancient monument and in guardianship from 1946 (National Heritage List for England: 27556; PRN 00351; see T. Malim 2020a). Evidence of human activity begins with artefacts recovered which hint at Neolithic activity, yet the principal phases of the hillfort construction and occupation relate to the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age (c. 800 BC–AD 43). When at its height, the standing monument was likely a stronghold for a principal settlement, one of the multiple communities in the area and hosting a range of martial, socio-political, economic and ceremonial functions (Clarke *et al.* 2020; English Heritage 2019; T. Malim 2020a; Matthews 2020a).

While there have been a wide variety of Iron Age settlements found in Wales and the West Midlands of England that differ greatly in terms of landscape situation and function, the multivallate monument



in north-west Shropshire appears to be under-appreciated compared with comparable monuments in southern England. Certainly, it has received few excavations considering its prominence as a ‘treasured’ UK landmark (Johnston 2019; Richie 2018; Shropshire Council HER 2011a). There has been minimal artefact recovery, only through a series of excavations in the North Wales area by Varley (in 1939–40) and field observations by Ordnance Survey, English Heritage and Shropshire Council from 1960–1986 (Hughes 1996; Shropshire Council HER 2011a).

The formal excavations by William James Varley resulted in a minute assemblage of VCP pottery (stone-gritted *very coarse pottery* (Hughes 1996)). The ceramic remains were initially associated with phase iv of the monument, attributed to the post-Roman period, but they have since been alleged to be of Iron Age origin (Hughes 1996: 86; Varley 1948: 11). Varley’s primary scope was broad enough, with a limited focus on the Old Oswestry hillfort, yet although preliminary findings were published (Varley 1948: 41–66) they were not fully published until the 1990s (Hughes 1996; Malim and Nash 2020; Shropshire Council HER 2011a). The hillfort was large enough (c. 2.1ha) to accommodate settlements from the Neolithic period through to the Roman occupation. The complex defensive ramparts comprise at least four distinct phases in development (English Heritage 2019; Hughes 1996). The banks and ditches were formidable and strategic, a viable defence against attack and a medium of display over its environs, exhibiting the prestige, wealth and authority of its creators (Ritchie 2018; see also T. Malim 2020a).

The two innermost ramparts were the first to be built in the Early Iron Age (English Heritage 2019; Hughes 1996; Shropshire Council HER 2011a). It was reorganised during the Middle Iron Age with the addition of two more banks and ditches to the enclosure, an additional stone revetted entrance, and the outermost ditch may have been buried during this later phase of improvement (English Heritage 2019; Varley 1948, fig. 3, 51). Finally, two substantial ramparts were added onto the hillfort, which were shaped into a continual slope up to the summit of the landmark (Shropshire Council HER 2011a). The recently discovered ‘Epona’ stone close to the western entrance might hint at cultic Iron Age associations with the site, although the function and dating of this damaged relief carving of a horse remain uncertain (Nash *et al.* 2020).

Slight evidence of Roman activity hint at the site’s enduring, if reduced, significance (English Heritage 2019; Hughes 1996: 86; Matthews 2020b; Shropshire Council HER 2011a). The Iron Age societies of what became Wales remained unconquered by the Roman expedition for 34 years following the Claudian invasion of AD 43, resisting assimilation into the Roman Empire for an entire generation (Guest 2008). Once consolidated, Roman military control radiated outwards from the two legionary forces at *Isca Augusta* (Caerleon) and *Deva* (Chester), connected via Watling Street. Much of Watling Street, the Roman passage from Caerleon to Deva, has been partly repurposed into the modern A5 trunk road; which has passed directly through the setting of Oswestry hillfort since 1992 (Andrews 2017). Following the assimilation of Wales into Britannia, traces of continued occupation/reoccupation from the excavations remain slight but tantalising (Hughes 1996), Old Oswestry hillfort may have transitioned from being a naturalised symbol of strength into a liminal area that marked contours of subservience for the *Cornovii*, although the current heritage interpretation has nothing to say about the Roman-period finds discovered on the site (Hughes 1996; see Williams 2015).

The immediate post-Roman story of Old Oswestry and its environs is difficult to chart (see Matthews 2020a), yet by the early 7th century, Old Oswestry’s strategic location at the intersection between uplands and lowlands, and between the watersheds of the Dee and Severn, reveals it as a key node in an emerging Anglo-Welsh culture of alliances as well as conflicts between Mercian and Welsh rulers (Brady 2017: 24). Close by was the site of the battle of *Maserfelth* (*Maes Cogwy*) where the Mercian king Penda and Welsh forces led by Cadwallon defeated and killed Oswald of Northumbria (Brady 2017: 37). The site of Oswald’s death was marked by a sign following the healing of a sick horse, then a wooden



Figure 3: Looking north along the line of Wat's Dyke from Old Oswestry hillfort (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2019)

cross and finally a church by 1086, with St Oswald's well and an ash tree there also drawn into the legend (Stancliffe 1995: 90–91). Subsequently the town's name, *Croesoswallt* (Oswald's cross), preserved the story through the later Middle Ages. Evidently this was a frontier zone from at least the 7th century, attested by the battles of successive Northumbrian kings (Stancliffe 1995: 92).

This frontier zone was to be monumentalised during the late 8th when Offa's Dyke augmented the hills to the west of the hillfort. Soon after, perhaps within the reign of Offa's successor, Coenwulf, the hillfort was carefully incorporated into the early medieval linear earthwork of comparable magnitude to Offa's Dyke if shorter in length, now known as Wat's Dyke (T. Malim 2020b; Figure 3). Britain's third longest monument, one of numerous linear earthworks amid the landscape of the Anglo-Welsh border, Wat's Dyke was constructed as a frontier work of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia to control and manage movement through the landscape as part of a western frontier zone facing Welsh rivals (T. Malim 2020b; Ray this volume; Williams this volume). The incorporation of the hillfort may have coincided with its reoccupation as a lookout post, beacon site and perhaps also an assembly place, although there is no conclusive evidence of further features of early medieval date. Yet, the sacral and mythological associations of the hillfort and its hinterland might have also been significant for the Mercians, especially as the cult of Oswald might have already been fostered and perpetuated through this period in spite of Oswald's associations with a rival Northumbrian dynasty (Stancliffe 1995: 94–95). For while the hillfort and the church in Oswestry established by the 11th century and which became dedicated to St Oswald are intervisible but not contiguous, there is a broader pattern of the reuse of prehistoric enclosures as elements of ecclesiastical landscapes in Anglo-Saxon England (Semple 2013: 128–131). The hillfort and Wat's Dyke together fortified a pre-existing sacred, and perhaps ecclesiastical, landscape. Again, however, the significance of Wat's Dyke in relation to the hillfort, church and later town is given only brief attention in English Heritage's interpretation on site and online (Williams 2015, this volume).

How the hillfort was used and perceived through the Later Middle Ages, so close to the church, castle and market town, is unclear and certainly not tackled by the recent publication (Malim and Nash 2020a) or by either on-site or online heritage interpretation. Still, the traditional names recorded from the early modern antiquarian accounts for the site offer clues: with its perception as an ancient residence (Yr Hen Ddinas: the old stronghold: Malim 2020a: 65) and Arthurian connections (Caer Ogyrfan: suggesting a link to Guinevere's father) (Hughes 1996: 50; C. Malim 2020; Shropshire Council HER 2011a). The likelihood of a worked agricultural landscape extending from the medieval town of Oswestry is suggested by the recent revaluation of the Oldport Farm (Nash 2020a). Both the landscape and its folklore and legends require more careful consideration in informing the hillfort's significance today (C. Malim 2020).

While the early modern discussions of the hillfort have been framed only in terms of brief antiquarian descriptions (Malim 2020a), the emerging landscape of Oswestry can be considered in terms of borderland identities too, although again, to date these are not narrated to visitors. Ecclesiastical histories following the medieval period, such as presented by Ellis (2010), clarify the context of religious control and revolution sparked in late Tudor Britain between Roman Catholics and the burgeoning Church of England (AD 1485–1603) (Ellis 2010). By the early Stuart period, what was once a dangerous atmosphere for Roman Catholics in England had become a relatively pluralistic environment (Ellis 2010: 278). Ellis discusses the 'Turberville sisters', who were Welsh siblings from an Anglo-Welsh border town comparable to Oswestry (2010: 279). The diasporic pair committed to Catholicism in England as Canonesses, which was not possible openly in Wales (Ellis 2010). Ellis remarks that whilst they are referenced as 'English' in literature, they were Welsh, unlike the rest of the canonesses (Ellis 2010: 279). The sisters benefitted from a few months of Catholic education, whilst accommodating themselves to mainstream English theology and holding no 'Welsh goals' that may have been more akin to later appearing Liberation theologies (Gutierrez 2001; Cone 1996). This link to later Liberation Theology stems from how the 'weak Welsh presence' in these ecclesiastical settings was a result of subtle geographical, linguistic and cultural factors that caused convent life to be unattainable for Welsh Catholics in the 16th and 17th centuries AD (Ellis 2010). This sense of English ambivalence towards Welsh communities was a most visible injustice when taunted with a more liberated alternative, only superficially attainable for borderland communities like at Oswestry; where the prominence and former allusions to power by the hillfort proved to be a null vantage point for those aspiring for social mobility at the borderland (Ellis 2010). As Anzaldúa (1987) puts so aptly, through this example of socio-religious gridlock, we can see how members of the borderland community were caught between two cultures and were outsiders in both. Framing the hillfort in relation to the social, economic, religious and political landscape of the early modern and industrial periods in the borderlands is clearly a priority for future research which might, again, inform local understandings of the monument.

Jumping forward to the First World War (1914–1918), troops were hosted by the Park Hall camp, including famous war poet Wilfred Owen, when they used the hillfort as a military training area (English Heritage 2019; Nash 2020b). This contemporary phase has led to some misunderstanding in the heritage interpretation of the earthwork because of the destruction that took place at this stage of the hillforts' usage. Trenches were carved out of the landscape and additionally, shallow craters were created from the use of explosives on the mound (English Heritage 2019). English Heritage (2019) cited that this damaged much of the archaeological interior of the fort. In recent centuries, the hilltop was thickly wooded and utilised as a game preserve before being cleared of vegetation by the Ministry of Works after the Second World War and used only for sheep and cattle to graze (Hughes 1996: 50). Again, none of this later history is enshrined in the site-based and digital heritage interpretation of the hillfort. The story of Oswestry and its adjacent hillfort have tended to focus on binary geographical designations relating to either England or Wales rather than its monument and landscape biographies.





Figure 4: An annotated aerial photography used by the HOOOH campaign to explain the threat to the landscape setting of Old Oswestry hillfort from proposed development (Reproduced with permission. Alastair Reid (photo) and HOOOH).

Finally, we need to consider the connectivity of both Oswestry and its hillfort to deep-time routes of movement through the landscape: the very arteries of communication which the early medieval Wat's Dyke sought to control by incorporating the already ancient hillfort (Malim 2020a and b). The A5 road was built over several phases and may have prehistoric origins. The modern re-organisation of the road was commissioned in 1810, following the Act of Union 1800 wherein Ireland and Great Britain became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Thomas Telford was commissioned to design the blueprint for the road, linking London to the Menai Bridge and Holyhead Port, passing through North Wales and Oswestry and thus connecting England to Ireland and helping consolidate the former's control of the latter. Shortly before the Second World War (1933), the modern A5 bypass was constructed, thereby incorporating the remains of Roman Watling Street from London to Shrewsbury. The effect of this is that Oswestry remains, to this day, caught between two nations, and an outsider in both England and Wales (Anzaldúa 1987).

## Discussion

Old Oswestry hillfort is a rare example of a well-preserved large multivallate hillfort. Despite recent work, much remains to be learned about the hillfort's biography and significance from prehistory to the present, and its wider landscape context (C. Malim 2020; T. Malim 2020a and b; Matthews 2020a;

Nash 2020a and b). Furthermore, this is a landscape in peril from development and is thus a focus of ongoing contestation between local people, heritage organisations, builders and local authorities (Nash and Malim 2020). Once the landscape is gone it will be forever lost, along with the opportunity to fill the vast gaps left vacant by Varley's (1948) contentious excavations (Hughes 1996). The huge gaps in our knowledge are thrown into sharp relief by the lack of archaeological investigations subsequently.

While the monument has been respected, conserved and managed through its scheduling and well known through its monumental earthworks, its broader urban and rural landscape settings, including its relationship with Wat's Dyke, remain in peril. The hillfort and its setting face external threats and might be justifiably perceived as fragile, especially considering the limited degree of robust investigation the monument and its immediate setting has inspired. A number of local and national media publications have drawn attention to this disparity, between the perceived *value* of the hillfort and the *actions* taken to recover its material culture, in discussions and campaigning over the Whittington Road development proposals by Galliers Homes (Clarke *et al.* 2020; Nash and Malim 2020).

While Malim and Nash (2020) have made a valuable contribution to the *story* of the hillfort and its environs, these remain portrayed as fragments of a linear narrative from past to present. Yet, there remains considerable potential for instead conceptualising and exploring the monument's biography as a site of memory, in which the hillfort's monumentality and landscape context are considered in biographical terms from prehistory to the present merging historical phases with mythological connotations. We argue that only by taking this cumulative biographical approach is the monument's value and significance for borderland identity revealed, not simply as a multi-phased monument, but as a timemark accruing significance during use and abandonment and successive reuses through the centuries. Thus respecting both tangible and intangible heritage (see also Swogger 2020), this understanding of the hillfort is inevitably hindered by the limited archaeological investigations conducted thus far upon the hillfort and in its surroundings. Moreover, this perspective is further hampered by the current heritage interpretation focusing near exclusively upon the hillfort's later prehistoric phases (see also Williams 2015, this volume). Yet more positively, the biography has been fostered through HOOOH's campaign, affording an emotional and social significance to the monument in the present, and for the future.

Yet, how might the monument's biography be narrated in future, escaping from the stranglehold of archaeological categorisation of the earthworks, and detaching them from the rich story of the inhabited and worked landscape in which they are set? One successful avenue has been John G. Swogger's (2020) innovative heritage comics which have fostered engagement among local people in the different stories connected to Old Oswestry, from geology, prehistory, the Middle Ages and nature conservation to First World War history and steam railway preservation. Moving forward, integrating the emotive and mnemonic dimensions of the hillfort must be considered key to creating sustainable and meaningful protection and engagement with both the hillfort itself and its hinterland (Clarke *et al.* 2020). The questions that remain are numerous; but one stands above the rest, what comes next for the determined people of Oswestry, their hillfort and their housing crisis?

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